



OFFICE OF VOCATIONAL AND ADULT EDUCATION
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KEY ISSUE BRIEF

A BRIEF ON VARIOUS TOPICS RELATED TO HIGH SCHOOLS,
COMMUNITY COLLEGES, AND ADULT EDUCATION PROGRAMS.

STANDARDS-BASED ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS

Efforts to Improve Education Across the Nation

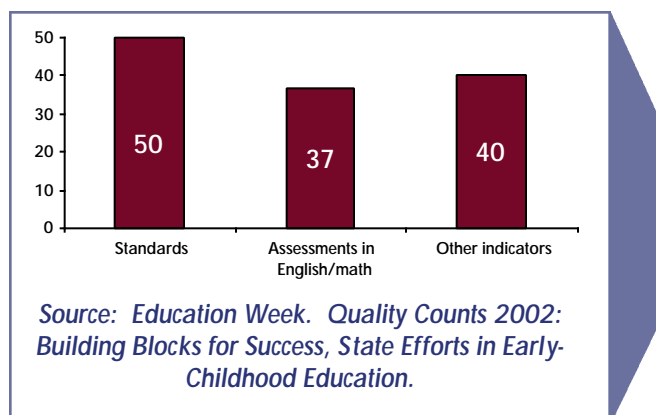
Stagnant trends and increasing gaps in student achievement—particularly since the 1980s—have sparked widespread concern, policy debate, and experimentation with ways to improve our nation's high schools. At both the state and national levels, numerous educational reforms have been implemented, many now influencing how schools prepare students for the future.

Foremost among states' reform efforts is developing and implementing standards-based accountability systems. Among the common components of these systems:

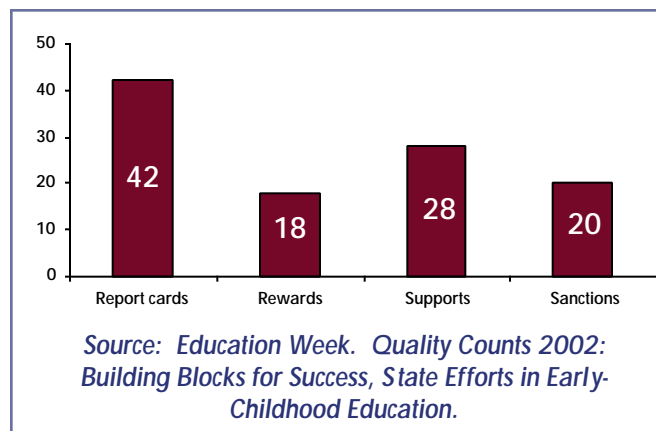
- Content and/or performance standards
- Assessments
- Other indicators or measures of student achievement (i.e., dropout, graduation rate)
- Public reporting on school and student outcomes
- Rewards, sanctions, and supports for schools and students¹

The State of States' Accountability Systems

Particularly since the mid-1980s when these efforts first took hold, states have made considerable progress in building and implementing their accountability systems.



Thirty-seven (37) states will administer standards-based assessments in English and math at least once in high school. In 17 states, the class of 2002 will be required to pass an exit exam or end-of-course exam to graduate.



Forty (40) states report to the public on student attendance, dropout rates, and graduation rates.

Among the sanctions that states now have the authority to use:

- Nine (9) can impose closure
- 15 may reconstitute a school
- 11 permit students to transfer to a higher-performing school
- Two (2) can withhold funds from low-performing schools.

Challenges To Implementing Accountability Systems

As states implement their standards-based accountability systems, they report encountering many challenges along the way:

- Connecting standards to curriculum and instruction
- Aligning assessments to standards
- Lacking sufficient standards and assessments for vocational education
- Aligning standards to postsecondary entrance requirements and entry-level employment standards
- Disaggregating data to examine achievement gaps among students
- Basing rewards, sanctions, and supports on valid and reliable criteria
- Implementing a supplemental accountability system for vocational education as required under the federal Perkins legislation.

Necessary But Not Sufficient

It is important to note that standards-based accountability systems alone will not be effective without supporting infrastructures. Schools also need to have curriculum and instructional practices that are aligned to their graduation standards, teachers who are well-trained and equipped to use the standards, and supports to assure all students can meet the standards.



Taking Action: OVAE's Role in Preparing America's Future

The Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Education Amendments of 1998 requires states to develop accountability systems for vocational education that focus on academic achievement of vocational students and academic integration of vocational programs. However, unless the entire high school is oriented toward bringing high levels of academic success for all students, it is unlikely that vocational programs alone can bring a subset of those students (vocational concentrators) to reach high levels.

Through a review of research and conversations with field, OVAE is examining the issues around accountability systems that can help create an overall environment of success for all high school students, including students who participate in vocational education.

What the Research Says

While studies are still underway to determine the impact of these new standards-based accountability systems, some new analyses suggests that these efforts may be on the right track.

A recent study conducted by The Education Trust examined “frontier states”—those leading the country in overall achievement and a narrowing of achievement gaps on National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) tests. Frontier states were quite diverse, including traditional high-performers like Iowa and North Dakota, but also including states with high concentrations of poor and minority children, such as Kentucky and Texas. What these states were found to have in common were policies focusing on:

- Higher standards
- Meaningful assessments
- Real accountability
- Better instruction
- Good teachers²

Another recent study (Bishop 2000) found that curriculum-based external exit exam systems significantly increased student achievement. Students from countries with medium- and high-stakes systems outperformed students from countries of comparable levels of economic development that did not use such exit exam systems. Bishop found these results even when low-stakes curriculum-based external exams—such as New York State Regents exams—were implemented.³

Sources

- 1 Education Commission of the States. Education Accountability Systems in the 50 States. Downloaded from <http://www.ecs.org>.
- 2 The Education Trust (Spring 2001). “New Frontiers for a New Century: A National Overview,” *Thinking K-16*, Vol. 5, Issue 2, p. 7.
- 3 Bishop, J. CPRE Policy Brief: Curriculum-Based External Exit Exam Systems. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania, Graduate School of Education, 2000, p. 3.

For Further Information

For issue briefs on other high school topics, as well as information on upcoming events under OVAE's Preparing America's Future Initiative, please visit <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OVAE/paf.html>.